

# Associations Between Depressive Symptoms and Perceptions of Emotional Loneliness

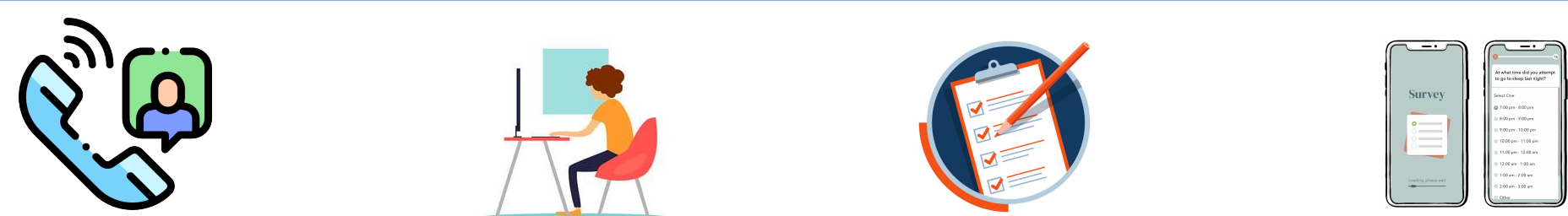
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## Introduction

- College students have experienced an increase in mental health problems without a comparable increase in treatments aimed at targeting their unique stressors (Beiter et al., 2015).
- Lower perceived social support and greater loneliness are significant predictors of depressive symptoms (Wang et al., 2018; Bosworth et al., 2008).
- Depression and social disconnection exacerbate one another through negative cognitions related to interpersonal relationships (Kaveladze et al., 2020).
- A social approach to depression prevention and treatment may benefit young adults in improving mental health outcomes.
- Our primary aim of this study is to better understand the relationship between depressive symptoms and perceived emotional loneliness, despite actual closeness in relationships.

**We predict that an increase in the number and severity of depressive symptoms will be associated with more frequent perceptions of emotional loneliness, despite actual closeness of relationships.**

## Experimental Design



Eligibility Screening → Baseline Session → Friend Surveys → EMA Data Collection

- 100 Undergraduate Students (50 male, 50 female)
- Eligibility is determined through virtual screening form.
- Participant completes Patient Health Questionnaire, Experiences in Close Relationships Scale, and Profile of Mood States Questionnaires to assess depression, attachment, and mood.
- Primary participants nominate two close friends to complete the relationship perception survey.
- Participant completes ecological momentary assessment (EMA) diaries twice daily for two weeks, reporting their mood, loneliness, and feelings of relationship closeness to each nominated friend.
- The study concludes after day 14 EMA.

## Depression and Perceptions of Closeness over Two Weeks

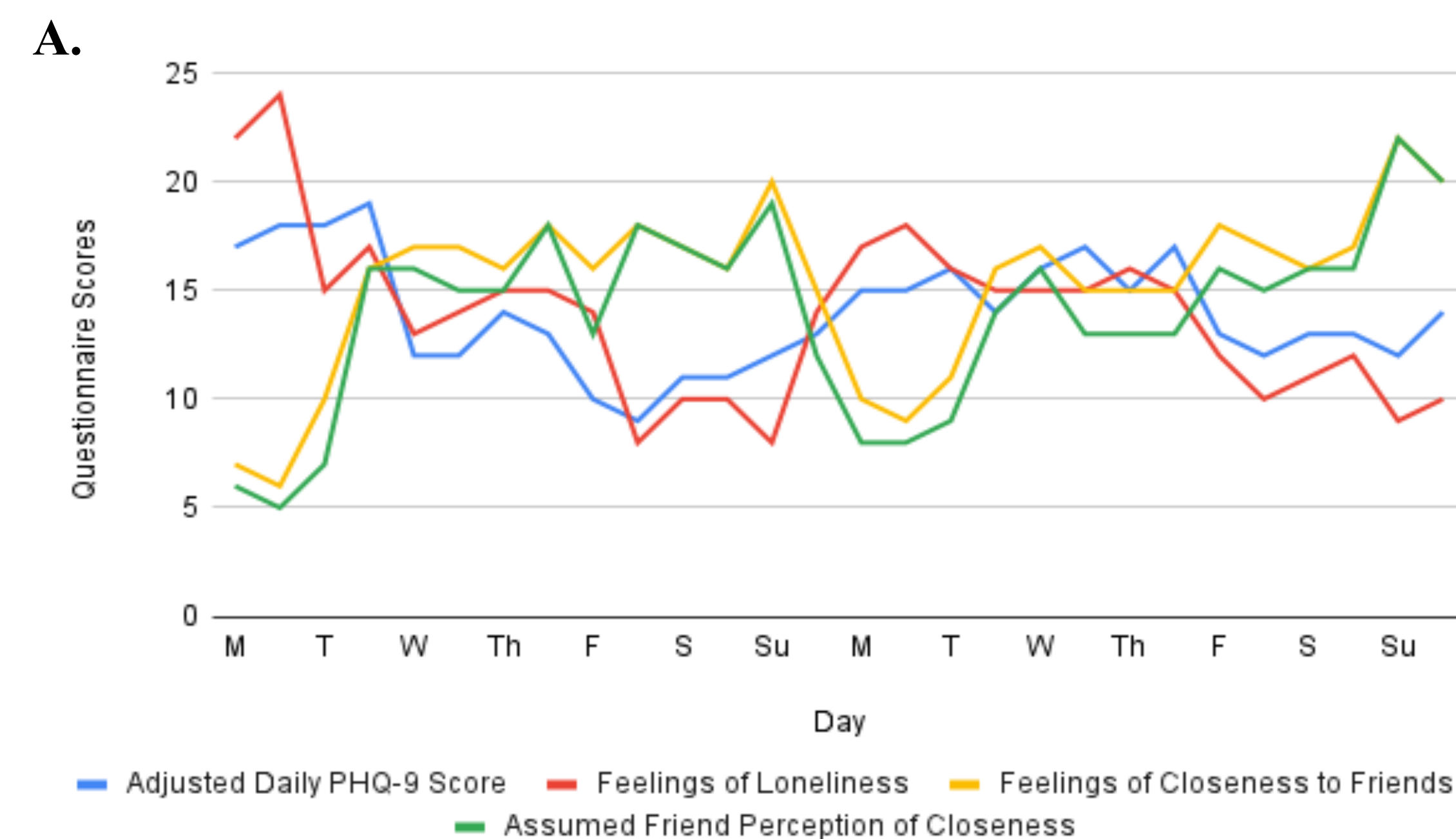


Figure 1. Among main participants, there was a strong positive correlation between levels of depression (PHQ-9) and feelings of loneliness. Depression was also strongly correlated with perceptions of relationship closeness, such that participants with greater depressive symptoms reported 1) feeling less close to friends and 2) more negative perceptions of their friend's feelings of closeness toward them.

## Depression is Associated with Lower Mood Stability

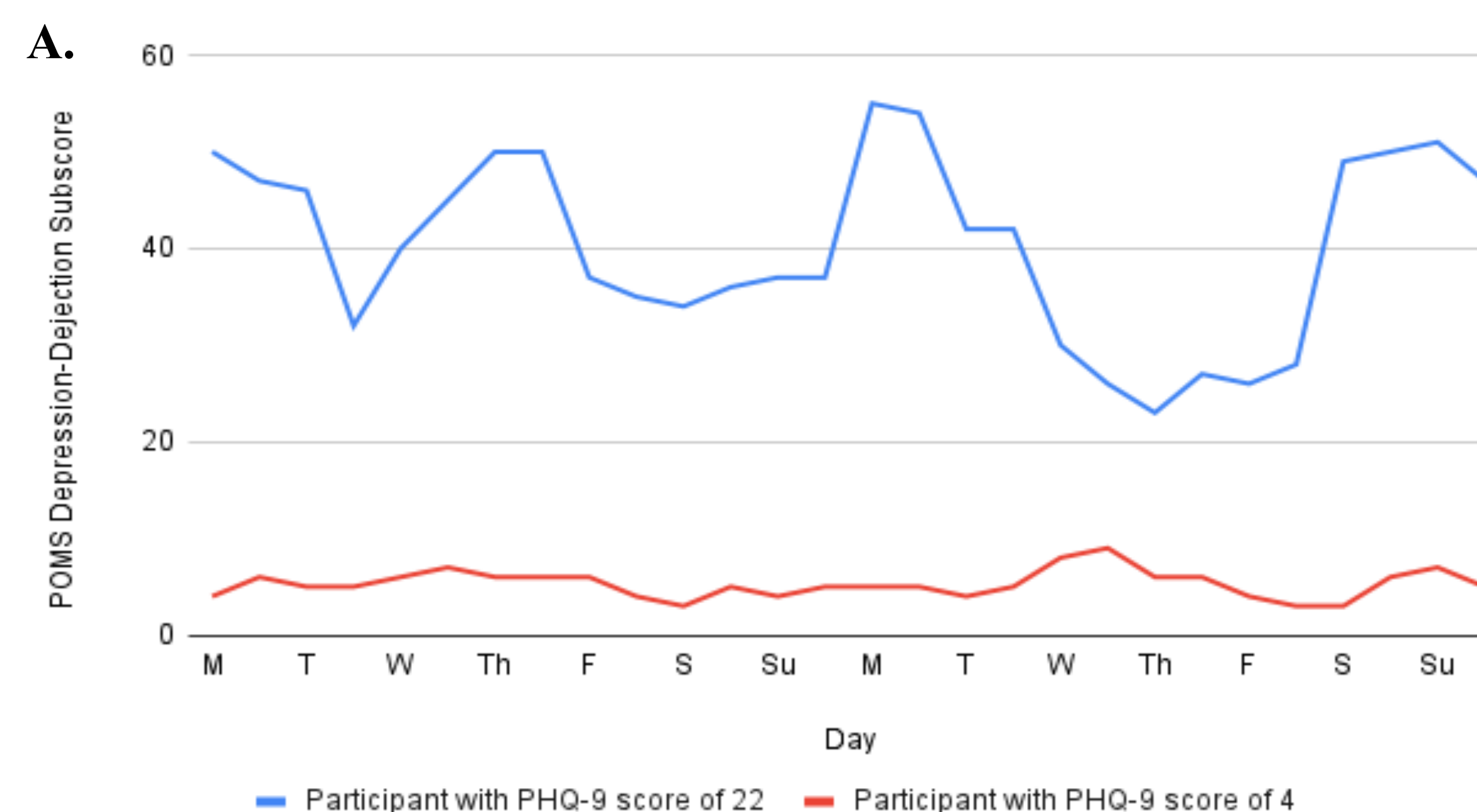


Figure 2. Participant with higher depression level and PHQ score of 22 had higher mood instability than participant with a low PHQ score of 4.

## Depression as a Predictor of Accuracy in Relationship Closeness Perceptions

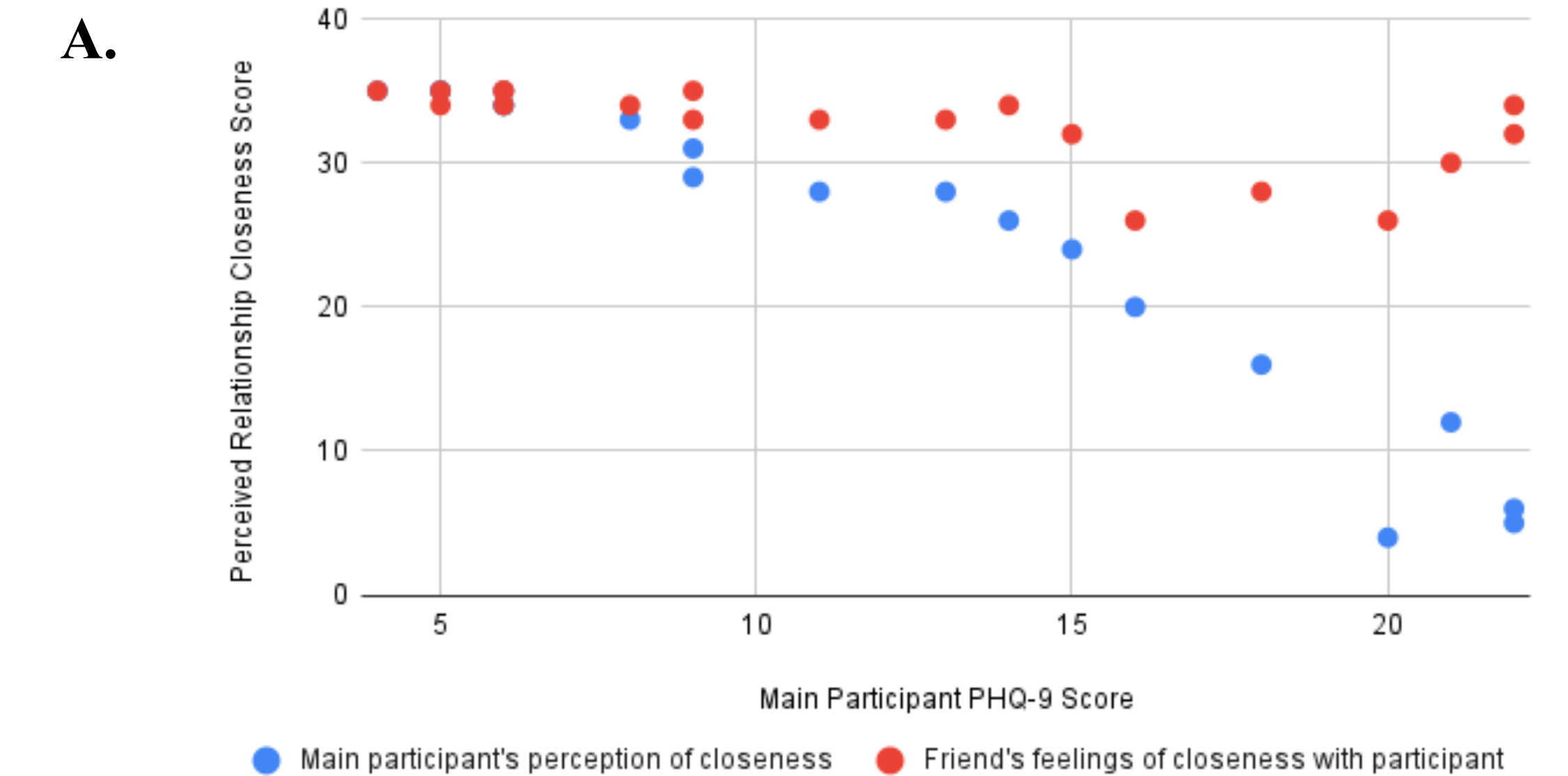


Figure 3. As depressive symptoms increase, participants show an increase in negative cognitive distortions involving their estimation of friend's feelings of closeness in the relationship. Higher ECR-S scores indicate higher perceived relationship closeness (reverse coded for interpretation).

## Conclusion

- We expect a strong positive correlation between levels of depressive symptoms and perceived feelings of loneliness.
- Greater mismatch in perceived relationship closeness will occur with participants who have greater feelings of depression and perceived emotional loneliness.
- Past depressive symptoms and feelings of perceived loneliness may predict these future constructs, perpetuating maladaptive cycles of behavior in which people do not receive social or emotional benefits from close others.
- Future research may investigate associations between perceived emotional loneliness and depression longitudinally and in clinical populations.

## References

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